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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, social reproduction theorists have criticized achievement ideology as a dominant and dominating myth that hides the true nature of class immobility. Social reproductionists' primary criticism of achievement ideology is that it blinds the working class, regardless of race or gender, to the possibilities of collective social action against capitalism. Although Marxist scholars only include race as an outcome of or afterthought to capitalism, there have been attempts to add race to the field of social reproduction theory. The problem of whiteness still haunts workers' struggles in that white Marxists tend to believe that a primary focus on race draws attention away from class analysis and class unity. By beginning their analysis with their focus on achieving middle class status, reproductionists miss a depth of knowledge on the larger force of achieving whiteness on working-class whites. Reproductionists argue that the working class exists because it allows the middle class to be regenerated. A similar argument can be made for race, namely, that it is a social construction and not a biological reality. Achievement ideology can no longer be perceived solely in terms of achieving middle class status. It must instead be viewed in more race-focused terms. (Contains 25 references.) (MN)

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Running Head: Achieving Whiteness

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The Achievement Ideology and Whiteness: "Achieving Whiteness" or "Achieving Middle Class"?

Over the last few decades, social reproduction theorists have criticized the achievement ideology as a dominant and dominating myth that hides the true nature of class immobility. According to this myth, any individual who works hard, gets an education, and assimilates to behavioral norms can and will achieve class mobility. It is the philosophical premise underlying the illusory "American Dream" of middle-class status and property ownership. Social reproduction theorists, following the work of Marx, have argued that the very same social institutions that are suppose to act as sites of social mobility, like schools, actually act as mechanisms to recreate, or reproduce, existing social inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Some reproduction theorists have extended and deepened this argument by contending that in addition to class status other factors such as language (Heath, 1983; Bernstein, 1975), culture (Bourdieu, 1977), and political resistance (Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977) also determine the perpetuation of inequality generation after generation.

Social reproductionists' primary criticism of the achievement ideology is that it blinds the working class, regardless of race or gender, to the possibilities of collective social action against capitalism. Social reproduction theory contends that the achievement ideology causes members of the working class to believe that they are

atomist units living within a moral and just system of rewards. They believe that they live in a pure meritocracy where their hard labor will translate into a middle class life style. However, the system is anything but a pure meritocracy because it has cultural, linguistic, and political modalities that ensure that most working class people will remain working class. When the working class does attempt to climb the social ladder, vis-à-vis the achievement ideology and its supporting apparatuses, they seldom have their dreams fulfilled and often blame themselves for their perceived failures, or so the social reproductionist argument goes (MacLeod, 1995). The result can be self-hate; they hate themselves and people like themselves. The other problem is that those working-class people who do criticize the myth of the achievement ideology often become fatalistic and opt for working class jobs (MacLeod, 1995; Willis, 1977). In neither case are working-class folk likely to learn about or see value in collective, cross-racial struggle. Without strong social movements by the oppressed, the result is a society where those who are comfortably in power feel little or no moral obligation to challenge the social structures that give them their unearned privilege and authority (Allen & Rossatto, in press).

One of the best examples of social reproductionist research is Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1995). This study of two youth groups in a housing project attempts to add race in a more central way to the field of social reproduction theory. By choosing one mostly white group and one mostly Black group who lived in the same poor economic situation, race had to be accounted for when there were differences between

groups. MacLeod argued that the racial constructs of the youths were constitutive of their explanations for their experiences in the job market. The "Hallway Hangers," who were mostly white, were critical of the achievement ideology, having seen several generations of their families attempt to succeed, only to fail. But their "insight" into the non-meritocratic nature of capitalism was fraught with contradictions. They were critical of the white middle class for being exploitative, yet they still desired to be like them. The Hangers would say that they were "street smart," yet beat themselves up for being, in their own eyes, unintelligent and lazy in school. But, moreover, they blamed African Americans and other people of color for getting "special privileges," that is, affirmative action, even though African Americans were not running the companies or doing the hiring. They saw affirmative action as a form of "reverse racism" that took away jobs that were "rightfully theirs." The other group in his study, the "Brothers," seemingly embraced the achievement ideology. Even though they were tracked in school, they still thought they would achieve middle-class occupations. Of course, they did not. In fact, they blamed themselves for not achieving, afterall, as MacLeod reasoned, they were often told that they were getting "special privileges" (i.e. – affirmative action) that other groups did not get. This myth combined with a colorblind education left them unable to deal with the structural racism in their educational institutions and job settings. The idea of a cross-racial workers movement seemed far away from the consciousness of either group.

Although most Marxist scholars only include race as an outcome of or after thought to capitalism (McLaren, Leonardo, & Allen, 2000), MacLeod pays significant attention to race. However, his research and its possibilities for social change are limited because its basic premise is that the term "achievement" in achievement ideology stands for "achieving a higher economic class" and not "achieving membership into a racial group." By beginning with Marxism, MacLeod and other social reproductionists are limited by the historical whiteness of Marxism. They see race as a modality of capitalism that negates class solidarity. Critical race theory, on the other hand, sees capitalism as a modality of racism that interferes with the type of racial unity and self-determination necessary to fight the effects of both white supremacy and capitalism. From the social reproductionist perspective, achieving middle class, or achieving wealth, is the desire that fuels the persistence and pervasiveness of the achievement ideology. From a critical race theory perspective, ***achieving whiteness***, middle class or not, is the desire that fuels the "achievement ideology," an ideology not contextualized as much by the totality of capitalism as it is by the totality of white supremacy. In this more race-focused and anti-white supremacist version of the achievement ideology, "middle class" only becomes a significant identity in that it is what white folks have created for themselves to normalize and naturalize their racist power and privilege. In white supremacy, capitalism is a mechanism that does the bidding of whiteness, creating class-

minded and race-blinded white folks who, although possibly well-intentioned, are allowed to be oblivious and inattentive to white power (Allen, 2000).

The fatal flaw in the basic premise of a Marxism predicated first and foremost on class terms can be seen in the historical practice of Marxism in the workers movement in the U.S. The workers movement, which has been led primarily by white Marxists, has historically been an organizing force for white workers to fight capitalists for a bigger share of the profits of capitalism (and thus, is in many ways complicitous with capitalism). But, it also organized white workers into card-carrying members of the burgeoning U.S. white polity (Roediger, 1999). Their rewards for becoming faithful stewards of the white polity have been the "psychological wages of whiteness" (DuBois, 1935; Roediger, 1999). The workers movement bound whiteness and capitalism to form a social contract that allowed white workers to have the benefits and privileges of being members of the rather recent union called the "white race." The effect both then and now is that working-class whites understand and uphold a contractual system where, although they may not be middle class, at least they are not Black or a person of color. What was achieved in these historical struggles was no less than the solidification of the white race as a socially constructed polity comprised of previously stratified and disunited European ethnics. Immigrants from Europe were able to escape the oppressive remnants of feudalism or industrialism in Europe and "become white" in America, an opportunity not

given to people's immigrating from other parts of the colonized world as per the racial contract of whiteness (Allen, 2000; Mills, 1997).

The problem of whiteness still haunts workers' struggles in that white Marxists tend to believe that a primary focus on race draws attention away from class analysis and, thus, class unity. Of course, they are then left to wonder why people of color will not join their movement. Usually, they resort to blaming people of color for believing too much in capitalism, rather than seeing that people of color are also very concerned about the social structure of white supremacy as a means of daily survival. The critique of class-focused Marxism for many progressive people of color is that an eradication of capitalism does not necessarily equate with an eradication of white supremacy, and if one looks at examples of communist countries there is much basis for their concern (e.g., Robinson, 2000). Nevertheless, white Marxists continue to be consciously and unconsciously dismissive of the racial concerns of people of color, believing that race blinds people of color to the truth about capitalism. It is quite clear that many progressive and radical people of color see this as another form of white arrogance. As Freire (1970/1993) would argue, it is a great act of arrogance for oppressors to not learn about oppression from the oppressed in dialogue for it is only through the knowledge and radical love of the oppressed that all people, oppressor and oppressed, can be liberated and humanized. In the dialogue between white Marxists and progressive people of color, white folks have been mighty arrogant and have typically lacked the humility necessary

for working ***with*** people of color on their concerns about oppression (Allen & Rossatto, in press). Afterall, people of color have been fighting and surviving white supremacy and its economic tool, capitalism, for 500 years (Mills, 1997). Not to mention that white-led attempts to fight capitalism have, in the long run, not been very successful.

When MacLeod and other reproductionists begin their analysis with their focus on achieving middle-class status, they miss a depth of knowledge on the larger force of achieving whiteness on working-class whites. Although MacLeod did capture the more overt and generally recognizable racist dialogue and behaviors of the Hallway Hangers, he missed a much deeper analysis of their racial identity because he did not situate his study within the superstructure of whiteness. This leads to some serious concerns about the conclusions that he makes. For example, are we to believe that the Hallway Hangers invented the "reverse racism" argument that, according to MacLeod, shapes their beliefs about and actions toward people of color? Not very likely. Obviously, there is a much larger social structure, the racial contract of whiteness, that MacLeod leaves relatively unnamed, untheorized, and unanalyzed. Why do the Hangers so readily and so easily become members of the white race? They are ambivalent about becoming middle class, but they readily accept the desire of achieving whiteness. Rather than having "insight" into the myth of the achievement ideology, it appears to me that they have very little insight and in fact are quite complicitous with the achievement ideology of the racial contract. Why does MacLeod and other reproductionists assume that class position is

more of a driving force than status in one's racial group? If anything, achieving whiteness is more important to the Hangers than achieving middle class. Their "ambivalence" about becoming middle class is more about them wanting to gain position within the white race but not wanting to assimilate to do so. They know that if they assimilate to middle class status, they will be more "fully" white in terms of their sexuality, prestige, and power. They will be able to capitalize on their white male status within white supremacy. But in the mean time, they practice a white working-class brand of racial identity politics. They randomly beat up Blacks to prove their whiteness to other whites. They discriminate against people of color on the job site and in unions. They argue that affirmative action policies give people of color unjust preferential treatment. In short, they act as working-class emissaries for white supremacy in the hope that they will maintain their white privilege and power, and feed off of the psychological wages that come with achieving whiteness. They understand that if they ever do become middle class, they will be able to erase any stigma that goes with being from the projects, as long as they look, act, talk, and think "appropriately." The stigma is different for people of color in that the system of racial imagery established by the racial contract objectifies people of color as being "from the projects" even if they never lived there. Thus, the stigma that people of color must contend with is first and foremost about a belief in the inherent biological and cultural inferiority of a people. And the Hangers and those like them understand how this system works.

MacLeod's analysis of the Brother's also falls short. He problematically attributes the hope of the Brothers purely to factors: the recentness of the Civil Rights Movement and the newness of their living in a housing project. He argues that these two events contribute to their sense of boundless and naïve optimism. However, not once did MacLeod explore the possibility that Blacks have a history of maintaining hope in the face of white racism; that it is a cultural and historical survival strategy of many Black folks and other people of color who must live within the social context of white supremacy. MacLeod provides little evidence that he asked the Brothers direct questions about what it meant to be Black in the U.S. In other words, he did not begin with the premise of what achieving Blackness means when the dominant achievement ideology is based on the dystopic vision of achieving whiteness. Of course, this is not surprising since his main focus had to do with what it meant to be "working class." One of the consequences of MacLeod's text is that it often leaves readers, particularly white readers, with the impression that Blacks are too accepting of capitalism and the achievement ideology. It allows white Marxists to once again blame people of color for their own victimization, although this time Blacks are blamed for being hopeful and not seeing white racism as an obstacle to their progress. Meanwhile, they have a very limited and mostly class-based critique of the racial identity of whites. For example, MacLeod does not make this same analysis of the Hangers. He does not tell us just how conformist the Hallway Hangers are to the achievement ideology that places achieving whiteness at the

center of desire. Nor does he present us with text that demonstrates the fact that the Hangers are also racialized in ways that block their progress. Middle-class white supremacy establishes whites like the Hangers as their alibi. As long as the public sees working-class whites as the obvious racists, like a Ku Klux Klan family on the Jerry Springer Show, and not the middle-class whites, then middle-class whites can continue to benefit from white privilege by remaining off stage. So, although the Hangers have a critique of the class-based achievement ideology, they are rather clueless about the race-based achievement ideology that places achieving whiteness as the premium standard. The Brothers may or may not have been as clueless, but we will never know since MacLeod did not focus his data collection in this area.

Additionally, MacLeod seems to suggest that the Brothers experienced the same type of leveled aspirations experienced by the ancestors of the Hallway Hangers. The Brothers are suppose to represent the beginning of a social reproduction process that produces fatalism in a group; the Hallway Hangers are suppose to represent the end product. But, for as much as this tale tells us, it inevitably silences the larger story about immigration and assimilation in the U.S. Namely, the Hallway Hangers are an aberration in the white community. Although there are many poor whites, the percentage of whites who are poor is smaller than that of any other racial group. MacLeod fails to situate his story within the historical fact that the U.S. was established a place of opportunity for those Europeans who were willing and able to become white (Jacobson, 1998; Roediger,

1999; Sacks, 1994; Takaki, 1993). The Brothers experienced a much more typically American story. As a racialized "other," Blacks have not been allowed membership into the white opportunity structure. In fact, they have often been the "opportunity" to be exploited for white profit, whether psychological or material. And in some ways, the Hangers *did* experience a typically American story about those whites who do not do well economically. Poor whites are often filled with self-hate about their low status in the white community, afterall, they have few ways to rationalize why they are not "successful" like most whites (this is in complete contrast to MacLeod who contends that the Hangers have many reasons to rationalize their situation). They resort to an internalization of their racialized failure, which has racialized outcomes. They project their own lack of racial fulfillment and pride onto people of color, who they see as the obstacles to completing their full humanity, that is, their whiteness. MacLeod, on the other hand, argues that racism fills a class-based void. What he does not account for is how the leap is made from one totality to another, that is, from capitalism to white supremacy. My sense is that there is no leap. The Hangers' form of racism is consistent with their situatedness within the white community.

MacLeod built his study on the shoulders of another famous social reproductionist, Paul Willis. Willis began his famous text, *Learning to Labour* (1977), with two profound and provocative questions: Why do we allow the middle class to become middle class? Why does the working class choose to become working class? In

posing these questions, Willis assumes, and rightfully so, that social class is not a biological inheritance. It is instead a social construction, and thus can be changed through radical action. Social class is dialectically related to the totality of capitalism, and is thus structured. However, individuals and groups still have choices to act as agents against the structure. Therefore, he framed his questions so as to encompass structure and agency, reproduction and resistance. The first question suggests that society can be transformed so as to prevent the middle class from assuming their middle-class inheritance that capitalism provides them. On the other hand, the second question suggests that the working class actively complies, or "chooses," to become working class, and thus submits to the totalizing structure of inequality within capitalism. This occurs because they allow the middle class to be regenerated.

A similar argument can be made for race; it is a social construction and not a biological reality. Group membership, although highly determined by the superstructure of white supremacy, is nevertheless not guaranteed, as history has shown. It takes agency on the part of both oppressors and oppressed to reproduce group membership from one generation to the next. It requires a type of social and cultural reproduction that renews racial relations and inequalities as it keeps whites on top. What would Willis' questions sound like if achieving whiteness and not achieving middle class were the primary force driving social inequality? Well, it would sound something like this: Why do we allow whites to become white? Why do Blacks choose to become Black? These

questions require that we begin with the premise that whiteness and white supremacy is the primary organizing totality. And like Willis' questions, they are meant to be provocative and dialectically bound.

Let's start with the first question. Why do we allow whites to become white? The question begs us to see how we can intervene in a process that constructs a problematic and privileged group. It calls for a moral and political commitment to ending white supremacy. It suggests that the way to do this is to abolish the white race as an identification category without material meaning (Garvey & Ignatiev, 1997). There is a sense of agency in the question for whites. It implies that whites are actively seeking membership in the white race, that is, that they aspire to be white, and they can and should be stopped. Yet, it also implies that this is easier said than done; simply choosing not to see whiteness or use to cease using racial signifiers will not abolish whiteness. It has a social force that will remain in motion unless acted upon by a greater counter force. The "we" in the question is not a homogeneous group. Whites and people of color working to disallow the formation of a fictive white kinship will have different roles to play. Whites tend to have an easier time challenging and transforming other whites than do people of color. However, the main impetus for the abolition of whiteness, as Freire would argue, has to come from people of color. It is their knowledge and motivation that has driven any and all challenges to white supremacy.

Individualistic changes cannot determine whether whites are allowed to become white. Individual whites who renounce their white membership may well be radicals, however, most of the world will still see them as white and treat them accordingly. Besides, simply renouncing your membership does not negate all of the experiences and perspectives that one develops as a white person in a white supremacist world, nor does it wipe out the institutionalization of whiteness. Whites will only be disallowed from becoming white when whiteness is eliminated as a material and ideological social category that shapes reality. Arguing for the elimination of whiteness as a category is not the same thing as colorblindness. In colorblindness, race and racism is selectively, or sometimes unconsciously, left unnamed so as to protect white supremacy (Tatum, 1997). This is problematic because we need to name racial groups in order to get at the reality of racialized differences and see their objective elements. However, colorblindness still has a place in an anti-white supremacy view if it is seen as a utopic vision that is equated with a real world of equality and equity. But since we are not there yet, any estimation of contemporary society as a colorblind world is, at best, false. Therefore, when we ask why we allow whites to become white, we are asking ourselves why we are not able to form significant and widespread cross-racial alliances to abolish white supremacy.

The second question, "Why do Blacks choose to become Black?," could be asked of any group of color. (I chose Black because it is the oppositional metaphor to white.) Like the first question, the second question suggests that racial group membership has an

element of choice, even though it is highly structured by white supremacy. Unlike class status, racial group membership involves perceived biological markers that are not easily changed or hidden. Nevertheless, a person of color can choose to side with whites and white identity politics and fight against the identity politics of people of color. They can desire to be white and to have what white people have (Fanon, 1952/1967). Or, they can choose to desire to be Black and to support Black identity politics, as many Black folks do. In white supremacy, choosing to be Black (or Latino, Asian, etc.) is not as easy as it might seem. Sure, one does not have much choice when the world tells you that you are Black and there are serious consequences for being Black under the racial contract of white supremacy. But, that same system of racial oppression and denigration precludes and easy path to self-love; while at the same time making such a journey essential for survival. Internalized racism causes many people of color to desire to be white even though white supremacy will only let them get just so far while keeping the rest of their group subordinate. What is often seen as people of color "aspiring to the middle class" should be seen first as "aspiring to whiteness." As Signithia Fordham (1988) has noted, many African-American students who conform to the discourse of mainstream schooling often exhibit "racelessness," an identity characteristic whereby one believes that they are getting by on their own individual merits rather than on their relative willingness to assimilate to the structures of white supremacy. One could say that the school, as an ideological apparatus of whiteness, rewards students of color whose aspirations, either

consciously or unconsciously, revolve around achieving whiteness. Much research indicates, though, that these aspirations are leveled once the person of color finds that as they move higher up on the ladder of racial mobility they are left as one of the few representatives of their racial group.

Too often, the race-focused criticisms that people of color wage against the whiteness of schooling are misunderstood as a complete dismissal of the possibilities of education. Schooling can be done in a way that challenges white supremacy and internalized racism. It could provide a curriculum that teaches students of color to "lift as they climb" (Ladson-Billings, 1996). It could teach whites about their white privilege and their obligation to stop white racism (Tatum, 1997). However, we do not currently live in such a social context of schooling. Also, I am not suggesting by the second question that Blacks should not choose to become Black. Although Black group membership was a creation of the white oppressors, it is also a source of survival, strength, and radicalism in the face of white supremacy. Therefore, as long as whiteness exists, so will Blackness. However, as mentioned above, we must hope for the day when racial categories no longer have structural meaning and become eliminated because they are no longer needed to explain oppressive circumstances.

One final argument that I would like to make for seeing the achievement ideology in more race-focused terms is that whiteness itself is more that just psychological; it is a material property that is aspirated by legal praxis. Cheryl Harris (1995) contends that

whiteness shapes much of our notions of what constitutes "alienable" and "inalienable" property rights in the U.S. Most have heard of inalienable rights as part of the common discourse associated with the achievement ideology. An inalienable right means that the rules of property cannot be used to exclude people from something that should be available to all. In other words, there cannot be an identification of "owners" and "renters," and "trespassers." Less known is the term "alienable rights," which allow for property to be defined, located, and encoded. Alienable rights protect the concept of property from those who violate the rules that construct the value and integrity of property. For example, whiteness has been constructed as an alienable right that has been upheld time and time again in our courts. Slavery, housing segregation, busing, school funding inequities, placements of waste disposals and freeways, and school tracking are just a few of the examples of racially-biased practices that have been allowed to occur because abolishing them would violate the value and integrity of whiteness as property. Even after the Civil Rights Movement, whiteness as property has been upheld in so-called "reverse racism" cases that claim that affirmative action discriminates against whites, such as the *Bakke* case or the recent case against the University of Michigan Law School. Meanwhile, whites are allowed to retain and invest in the unfair wealth that they continue to receive at the expense of others, not simply because they have money, but because whiteness itself is a material interest to protect. Cases that have challenged the unequal funding of schools achieved through racist

banking and real estate practices, and financially backed by the U.S. government, have not succeeded (Lipsitz, 1998). In these cases, courts have refused to recognize the inalienable rights of people of color and have opted instead to uphold the alienable rights of whiteness as property, as per the racial contract. Certainly, no one plays the race card (i.e. – identity politics) quite like white folks.

In conclusion, the achievement ideology can no longer be perceived solely in terms of achieving middle-class status. Instead, we should look first to the achievement ideology that fuels the desire for whiteness. White Marxists have little difficulty seeing the value of class analysis, which is really no surprise since people in general seem to have an easier time seeing how they are oppressed rather how they oppress. Not so surprising, then, is that they often have a very difficult time with racial analysis. I think that white Marxists, like myself, need to ask themselves a basic question: What is more important, solidarity or truth? If the answer is "truth," then the respondent is obviously not aware that truth cannot be achieved without solidarity. In social reproduction theory, the truth about the relations of domination and the reproduction of inequality must be understood through the dialogical relations between white Marxists and people of color. And in this relation, the white Marxists are the oppressors, and as such, must enter the dialogue with humility and respect. Radical whites have much to learn from progressive people of color about the depths of both white supremacist and capitalist exploitation. However, since white Marxists represent the racial oppressor within a white supremacist

totality, the first barrier of trust is the one of race. Little or no trust on class issues can be built until white Marxists gain the trust of people of color on the issue of whiteness and white privilege. The implication for social reproduction theory is that we cannot begin with class-focused assumptions. By looking at the world through the lens of achieving whiteness, we will be more likely to approximate and internalize the view of both race and class that people of color see, and hopefully build a much stronger solidarity against all forms of oppression.

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